

I went past a store that advertised “All You Can Eat Sushi” and thought, “Well that’s a safe bet. Who would want to eat raw fish and cold rice and seaweed? Not me!”

You see, I am narrow minded and resistant to new experiences. And I am getting worse as years accumulate. And I have always been bad!

So it was for the Jews of Jesus’ time.

No sushi for them! Food laws kept the diet nice and well known. And no one went abroad because, well, why would you? God lived in Israel, made his home in Jerusalem and gave his chosen people a land of promise. In many ways life was satisfactorily arranged so that everything went predictably and stably along.

Then came Jesus.

After Jesus nothing has ever been quite the same.

Jesus introduces, into an ordered and predictable life, the sort of upset that Spring Cleaning, or a Winter Storm can generate, but bigger.

The Christmas story is full of departures from the acceptable script.

Mary should not be pregnant out of wedlock. For this she could have been stoned to death under the law. People should not give birth in stables. Shepherds should not be the first to know about the Messiah’s birth. More important people like priests should be told first. Messiah’s should be born in Jerusalem, not some backwoods village like Bethlehem. And so on. Lots of rules being broken.

But at least it was “all in the family”.

Then we get the festival of the Epiphany.

Now we have a group of outrageous foreigners to deal with! Gentiles, for heaven’s sake! And this would not have been merely three characters on camels. They would have had servants, bodyguards, cooks and cleaners, tents and the whole retinue! Closer to 50 filthy foreigners. They probably ate sushi!

There is, I think, a little hidden comedy in all of this.

The reading from St Paul speaks of the way, in Jesus, the saving covenant of God expands from the people of Israel to the whole world. (The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel). For Paul, as a Jew, this is an amazing revelation. God is actually going to pay attention to millions of people, non-Jews, who he has previously ignored.

But the Epiphany may not be the revealing of God to the Gentiles, but the revealing to the Jews that God has been talking to the Gentiles for ever. God has, in fact, been speaking to astrologers, to priests of strange religions, whispering in the ears of kings and beggars from far, far away places that know nothing of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!

(I remember the terrible shock, as a schoolboy, of discovering that one of my mother’s friends was the wife of my teacher. I had no idea that my teacher had a life beyond the school gate. It hadn’t occurred to me he existed outside of my experience of him as my teacher. I was mildly horrified.)

So what is the teaching in all of this? What is God opening our hearts and minds to learn?

Long ago, when Canada was at war with Japan, Japanese Canadians were rounded up in the West and had their property confiscated, and they were dumped in places where they were helpless and no threat. A large number got dropped off in the bush of Northern Ontario, north of Timmins. There was no road, only a railway line and the huts that had been built, a distance from the line, where they lived in squalor. For reasons I do not know about, the Anglican priest in Kapuskasing decided he would walk the track and follow the path that led to their prison. He met them and thought that they could do with some help. They seemed to him as if Christ might be hiding amongst them, so he served them as he would have served Jesus. Soon the congregation were gathering food parcels and winter clothing and generally trying to make life slightly better for these dreaded enemy aliens.

By the time Lucy and I served at St Mark's in Kapuskasing there was a significant Japanese presence in the town and in the membership of the church. It was our first Christmas, as I recall, that at a potluck feast I was offered Sushi. I was faced by raw fish with cold rice, wrapped in seaweed..... Offered to me by the smiling face of one of our loveliest Japanese ladies.

What did Mary, the young mother in a stable need most? Not, I think gold in a box. Not Myrrh, what ever that actually was. And definitely not incense. She needed a hotel room, a bath, some privacy....

And that is the humour of God. No one gets quite what they expect with God. God is always stretching you, opening your heart and your mind, inviting you to go "further". God, who is in everything that he has made, and is reflected in all his created beings, has so much more to show you of himself than we ever could expect. God has just begun with Sushi. He has curry, and Cajun ribs in store. He has pickled eggs and beaver brain for special delicacies. He has warm cattle blood that the Masai of my birthplace drink, and scotch whiskey which burns on the way down. Oh, I have no hope of staying merely, safely, English in the kingdom of heaven!

And so the teaching is that God is so much bigger than our image of him. There is so much more of her/him/it to discover under the mystery of divinity.

But the teaching is also that God knows we are all somewhat cautious, and local and anxious about change. And so he gives us, in his wide world, a small path that we can follow. He gives us his son Jesus. This child who, though so small, God has somehow allowed himself to be contained in. This Jesus, who we can know in prayer and worship, who we can read of in the Gospels. This Jesus who shows us, in ways we can follow, the path of love and compassion, the way of truth and vulnerability, the life of faith and of belief.

In the story of the Epiphany the Magi sweep in, in a dazzle of golden silks and purple turbans, gleaming swords and braying camels. They arrive smelling of odd perfumes and unusual suppers. They carry a world unknown into the small space of Mary's arms, and leave her amazed and humbled and, yet herself, but changed. And off they go, home by another path, the last tinkling of bridles and bells, and the sound of foreign chatter receding into the night.

I may never get to like sushi as much as I like fish and chips, but I am quite at home with chopsticks and Jamaican hot sauce holds no terror now. And I know God honours my rather narrow understanding of the fathomless mystery of her/his/its being. And I believe God has not finished opening me up to the epiphany of his transforming love, which it is his delight to make known to us.